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SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 09: A CRACK IN THE LEFT FRONT'S WEST BENGAL
ARMOR

REF: KOLKATA 7

11. (SBU) Summary. As the fourth most-populous state in the Indian Union, the seat of one of India's four great metropolises and the bastion of the Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPI-M), West Bengal politics has always had national significance. More important than the national electoral issues of terrorism or the US-India civil-nuclear agreement to the parliamentary elections in West Bengal are those of land acquisition, development and the possibility of a change in state government. A blossoming All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) and Congress party alliance poses the most serious threat to the ruling Left Front's efforts to maintain control of the state's parliamentary delegation in 2009 and legislative assembly in 2011 since it came to power in 1977. Nationally, a weakened CPI-M would be in less of a position challenge positive developments in the US-India bilateral relationship, such as the US-India civil-nuclear agreement, and regionally beat an anti-American, anti-imperial drum. End Summary.

12. (SBU) PolOFF engaged with a number of politicians, party members, journalists and businesspersons over the past couple of months to compile the following overview of the West Bengal electorate, political parties and personalities, issues and alliances ahead of the national parliamentary elections. Polling in West Bengal will be conducted in three phases on April 30, May 7 and May 13.

People - The West Bengal Electorate

13. (SBU) West Bengal is the fourth most populous state in the Indian Union with 83 million people and 42 of the 543 Lok Sabha seats (lower house of parliament). Hindus, predominantly Bengali in ethnicity, constitute approximately 70 percent of the population, Muslims 25 percent, with additional small Buddhist, Christian, Jain and Sikh populations. While 18 million people claim Scheduled Caste status (affirmative action based on membership in a historically disadvantaged socioeconomic religious community) and 4 million claim Scheduled Tribe status (affirmative action based on membership in a historically disadvantaged tribal community), caste and tribe status do not represent electoral fault lines within the state, as in some other Indian states. While there is an absence of visible religious or communal tension in the state, the lack of development and opportunities within the Muslim community, as exposed by the 2006 national Sachar Committee report contribute to a perceived sense of disadvantage in this minority community.

More than two-thirds of the population is employed in the agriculture sector; however, there continues to be sizable industrial presence despite the hemorrhaging of industry that began with the shift of the Indian capital from Kolkata to Delhi in 1912, continued with the waves of refugees arriving after the 1947 Partition of India and the 1971 birth of Bangladesh, and accelerated during the three decades of communist rule that

began in 1977.

Parties and Personalities

14. (SBU) The Left Front is an electoral alliance of nine leftward leaning parties, whose largest party is the CPI-M. It was dominant in the last election cycle. In the 2004 parliamentary elections, the Left Front won 35 of the 42 seats (CPI-M won 26); in the 2006 state assembly election it won 235 of 294 seats (CPI-M won 176). The "first past the post" electoral system magnifies the extent of left political control in the state - in 2006 its actual vote share was only 50 percent. While the most prominent CPI-M politician in the state is the Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, the state party Chairman and Politburo (central party) member, Biman Basu, heads the CPI-M organization. Despite the party's pride in its organizational capabilities and party discipline, it currently suffers from what appears to be an inter-generational conflict over transfer of power. Age - he is 95 years old - and the physical and mental health of the legendary former Chief Minister and CPI-M patriarch Jyoti Basu prevent him from being the active party unifier in West Bengal that he once was. The party has resorted to pre-recorded Jyoti commercials to try and rally the flagging comrades, who are split between supporters of Basu, and his successor in office, current Chief Minister Bhattacharya. The Left Front finds itself on the defensive, having to explain its decision to withdraw from the UPA government, downplay the threat of any opposition alliance through comparisons to an unsuccessful AITC and Congress alliance in 2001, and contextualize the strong Left Front showing in the 2004 parliamentary results as a historical aberration to reduce voter expectations for 2009.

15. (SBU) The Opposition in West Bengal is led by the AITC, a

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regional party without any representation outside of West Bengal, centered on the firebrand politician Mamata Banerjee. She split from the Congress party in 1998 over differences with the state party leadership and formed her own party which currently has one Lok Sabha seat and 29 state assembly seats. The 54-year old woman is a seasoned Left-baiter with the single-minded focus of dislodging the regime in West Bengal. A common criticism of AITC is that she practices an unpredictable "politics of opposition" and will not hesitate to sensationalize whatever opportunist agitation that she comes across at the expense of the state (a la Nano in Singur). She has exposed chinks in the Left Front armor, picking up Left Front defectors who did not receive party tickets to contest the elections - such as former CPI-M parliamentarian Abu Ayesb Mondal who recently joined AITC - and assembling a star cast of new contenders. AITC's challenge, which they've recently started to address, is to demonstrate that they are serious about and capable of governing. Many urbanites were disappointed by what was viewed as the AITC's politically opportune, but economically irresponsible Singur agitation.

16. (SBU) Current state Congress party president and Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee was installed by the central Congress party to provide leadership at the state level after the debilitating stroke of the former party president P.R. Das Munshi in October 2008. While Mukherjee has been a member of parliament since 1969, he was first elected to a Lok Sabha seat in 2004 from Jangipur. As an astute, well-spoken and educated "native son", and the only Bengali politician of national significance in the Indian government, he enjoys wide-spread admiration amongst the West Bengal electorate and politicians. A sitting CPI-M member of parliament recently told POLOFF that Mukherjee, as the one candidate with universal political support, would not encounter any difficulties in returning to parliament. The Congress party is a pragmatic opposition party that is more focused on national level politics than on the state and has strong organizational representation in the north Bengal districts. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is virtually non-existent in West Bengal and does not currently have a member of parliament or legislative assembly in the state.

Electoral Issues - Land and Development

17. (SBU) Land acquisition and economic development are the two primary electoral issues in West Bengal - more important than national issues of terrorism, the international economic slowdown or the U.S.-India relationship and the civil-nuclear deal. While local CPI-M party members and politicians admit that the party will need to explain its withdrawal from the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) in July 2008 over the US-India civil-nuclear deal, it will not actively campaign on this issue as it lacks resonance amongst the population. The CPI-M national party has, however, included it in the party election manifesto.

18. (SBU) The Government of West Bengal's disastrous attempt to forcibly acquire agricultural land for industry, in Nandigram in 2007 and Singur in 2008 (Reftel), has provoked a backlash amongst farmers, tribals and other marginalized communities. The string of recent land acquisition failures has prompted the state's industrialists and businessmen to question whether the Left Front can continue to deliver politically on the commitments of the West Bengal government and agencies to industrialists, specifically for land, and to look outside of West Bengal for business opportunities. The irony is that due to the CPI-M's success in land reforms, the "people's party" is now faced with the politically sensitive topic of how to re-acquire land from empowered farmers to promote industry and develop the state. The government's political inability to impose its will has encouraged other communities to forcibly resist land acquisition and emboldened the Opposition to challenge the state government. In a January state assembly by-election the AITC candidate and Congress-supported uneducated, illiterate mother of one of the slain activists from Nandigram trounced the CPI-M candidate and seized what had been considered a safe CPI-M state assembly seat. Ms. Banerjee, the most prominent opposition politician in the state, has adopted "land" as her primary electoral issue both literally and physically, having collected "bloodied" dirt from Nandigram to carry with her to every West Bengal district throughout the campaign.

Strategy - Unite to Conquer

19. (SBU) On March 2 Pranab Mukherjee announced that "an understanding" had been reached between AITC and Congress to jointly contest the parliamentary elections in West Bengal.

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Congress has yielded the role of primary opposition to the AITC and will contest 14, as opposed to AITC's 28, parliamentary seats, reflecting its recognition of AITC's current superior strength. Several state Congress party members have expressed displeasure at what they believe to be poor seat bargaining and surrender to the AITC. Mamata has defended her party's allocation of contested seats as a de facto recognition of political strength and reward for leading the charge against the Left Front over the last two years. AITC and Congress have united from their respective positions of strength at the state and national levels to exploit a perceived Left Front vulnerability in West Bengal and prevent a non-Congress, non-BJP Third Front from emerging as a national alternative.

Comment: The Beginning of the End of Communist Rule in West Bengal?

110. (SBU) Since Nandigram, AITC has been riding a wave of momentum to mount what may be the most formidable challenge to Left Front's lock on politics in West Bengal since 1977. AITC's success in the May 2008 panchayat elections (held at the village, block and district level), wins in recent state assembly by-polls, and prominent CPI-M defections are all encouraging signs for a nascent center-driven Congress and AITC electoral alliance that needs to overcome some grumblings at the ground-level. While AITC and Congress can rally around their leaders Banerjee and Mukherjee, CPI-M faithful lack that

awe-inspiring leader at the state level (state cadre are more concerned about West Bengal politics than the, at the center much trumpeted, Third Front). The CPI-M's defensive tactics, conceding and downplaying the predicted loss of parliamentary seats before the election, as opposed to campaigning on its performance in government, is indicative of a party struggling to hold on to power and vulnerable to an opposition riding a "wave of change" 32 years in the making. For the CPI-M and the AITC, the 2009 parliamentary elections are but a teaser for the real prize, which is control of the West Bengal legislative assembly. For India, though, the parliamentary elections in West Bengal may be much more significant. It may represent the first signs that the iron-fisted control that the communists have had in West Bengal - and the disproportionate influence in national politics that the communists have been able to exert due to their control of the state - is beginning to erode. Given the rhetorical hostility of the CPI-M to the United States, the derogation of communist power in West Bengal would be a positive development for U.S.-India relations.

TAYLOR